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Jessica W. Eipper  
Older Women's Perceived  
Independence in Post-  
Widowhood Repartnership

## ABSTRACT

This study investigated older women's perceived independence in late-life post-widowhood repartnerships and sought to better understand the ways in which repartnership impacted these women's sense of independence. Using a qualitative, exploratory design, the study adds to this relatively unexplored topic.

Heterosexual women who had lost a spouse and become re-partnered at the age of 65 or older were recruited from across Massachusetts. Ten repartnered women ages 73-93 participated in this study. In face to face interviews they were asked a series of questions focused on the following themes: 1) negotiation of shared and separate time, activities, space, resources, tasks and friendships in re-partnership; 2) decision making and compromise in re-partnership; 3) perceived independence in re-partnership; 4) perceived independence in previous marriage; and 5) perceived independence during widowhood and time spent alone.

Participants had multiple subjective definitions of independence. The majority felt independence could be maintained while choosing to make compromises in order to have companionate romantic relationships that impacted aspects of their autonomy. Others created stricter boundaries within romantic relationships to protect the autonomy gained during widowhood. Nearly all participants described a strong sense of perceived

independence in their repartnerships and reported that this was stronger than in their previous marriages.

OLDER WOMEN'S PERCEIVED INDEPENDENCE IN POST-WIDOWHOOD  
REPARTNERSHIP

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2009

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
III METHODOLOGY.....	31
IV FINDINGS.....	37
V DISCUSSION.....	63
REFERENCES.....	73
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Human Subjects Review Committee Letter..	77
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form.....	79
Appendix C: Interview Guide.....	82

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Older adults face many changes in later life. Popular views of these changes highlight the physical, social, and emotional losses that occur at this life stage. While these losses are significant in the lives of many older adults a more complete assessment of the changes occurring in this life-stage may highlight the potential for growth and positive change that exists in later life. This an alternative view that is supported by some more recent research (Frantz, Farrell & Trolley, 2001; Carr, 2004).

One of the most common changes in the lives of older adults, especially women due to their statistically longer life span, is the loss of a spouse (Gentry & Shulman, 1988). Death of a spouse is commonly a tremendous loss for older adults and causes significant grief: however this change may also create a new opportunity for increased independence (Lopata, 1996). Previous literature on widowhood found that some women enjoy their newfound independence and may experience increased feelings of confidence, freedom, mastery and personal strength as a result (Talbot, 1998; Moorman Booth & Fingerman, 2006; Carr, 2004). For the purpose of this study independence has been defined as the experience of autonomy, self-reliance, competence and self-efficacy (Carr).

Though many women who are widowed in late life remain single, some choose to enter new relationships. Literature has identified the psychosocial benefits gained from

these new relationships such as decreased loneliness and companionship (Bulcroft & O'Conner, 1986; Gentry & Shulman, 1988). Other research has looked at older women's disinterest in repartnership due to a desire to hold on to the independence and freedom they attained in widowhood (Moorman, Booth & Fingerhant 2006; Vinick, 1978; Talbott, 1998). There is, however, little research that examines women who choose to repartner and their experiences of independence within these repartnerships. A small but growing body of contemporary literature looks at boundaries women create in relationships, such as maintaining separate homes and financial accounts, in order to preserve their sense of autonomy once repartnered (de Jong Gierveld, 2002, 2004; Karlsson & Borell, 2002). Although more studies are being done, many gaps remain and many questions are yet unanswered. For example, do older women feel independent when they repartner? Does their sense of independence change when they repartner and in what ways? How does the sense of independence they have in repartnership compare to their independence in previous relationships?

Using qualitative methods the present study begins to explore these unanswered questions by asking the following overarching research question: What impact does post-widowhood repartnership have on older women's feelings of independence? Considering 1) the research on women's independence during widowhood; 2) the research on the benefits of companionship for older adults and; 3) theoretical literature on the human developmental needs for attachment, individuation, and separation across the lifespan (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 1991) the following hypothesis was developed: older women would preserve the sense of independence they had gained in widowhood by setting boundaries and negotiating compromise within their relationships.



It is my hope that examining older women's feelings of independence in post-widowhood repartnership will help researchers and clinicians better understand the adaptive role that companionship and independence can have on the lives of older women. The study's findings will also add to the understanding of how these women understand and negotiate their perceived independence in repartnership. This information will contribute new knowledge about the social and psychological supports that help older widows move through later life successfully.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that post-widowhood repartnership has on older women's perceived sense of independence. Due to the dearth of literature discussing older women's perceived independence in post-widowhood repartnerships, multiple related areas of literature will need to be reviewed in order to address the research question. First, literature on widowhood and its impact on independence will be discussed. This body of literature will provide an understanding of the changes women experience when widowed and the impact that these changes have on their feelings of independence. Next I will look at the literature on post-widowhood late life repartnership. This literature will provide a foundational understanding of the studied phenomenon, the motivations to repartner, and some of the barriers against repartnership. I will then move on to review the small body of literature that exists on older women's independence in late-life repartnerships. This literature focuses on women's attempts to preserve independence in repartnership. I will then review literature on the history of women's independence in heterosexual relationships and the historical loss of independence women have experienced in relationships. Next, I will briefly review the literature on the subjective nature of independence. This will help to conceptualize the concept of "perceived independence" and to identify the subjective nature of this concept. Finally I will discuss developmental theories of attachment and individuation as the

theoretical framework guiding the study. Together this literature will provide a conceptual roadmap and theoretical foundation that will guide this study.

### Widowhood

The death of a spouse is a significant loss that commonly creates tremendous emotional distress and change in the life of the surviving partner (Davidson 2001; Lopata, 1996; Parkes, 1996). These losses often evoke deep feelings of grief and the surviving partner frequently goes through lengthy periods of mourning (Lopata). This experience of spousal loss, grief, and mourning has been written about extensively. Some authors have looked at the gender differences that exist in responses to spousal loss (Carr, 2004; Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Lopata, 1979; Lopata; Moorman, Booth & Fingerman, 2006). These authors have found that for women the initial experience of widowhood is normally quite painful, as it is for men, and is typically marked by an acute phase of grieving that is accompanied by painful loneliness and mourning (Davidson, 2002) commonly lasting at least two years (Lopata). However these authors also highlight the positive changes women often identify in widowhood that distinguish their experience from the typical male experience (Carr, 2004; Davidson, 2001; Gentry & Shulman, 1988; Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Lopata; Moorman, Booth & Fingerman).

In the following section I will review the literature on the major social, emotional, and instrumental changes women experience during widowhood and then look at the effect these changes have on widowed women's sense of autonomy, competence, self-efficacy, and self-reliance.

### *Social, Instrumental, and Emotional Changes of Widowhood*

With the loss of a spouse comes major social change. Relationships with friends and family frequently shift in the face of grief and social roles and needs change. Lopata (1996), who wrote extensively on widowhood, found that family relationships could be strained both by emotional pain of losing a family member and issues of inheritance that frequently arise. Lopata and other researchers (Connidis & Davies, 1992; Vinick, 1978) also found that family relationships, especially relationships with children, could be strengthened by the mutual support provided during the grief periods. They found that women generally come to rely more heavily on their children as confidants and companions after the loss of a spouse.

Relationships with friends are also changed in widowhood. Women tend to become more connected with other single friends while feeling alienated from friends they formerly socialized with as couples (Lopata, 1996; Davidson, 2002). As women begin to adjust to their new position and search to redefine themselves and their roles they increasingly need the support of other widowed and single women (Lopata). Women often come to feel a strong sense of unity with other widows. Blau (1971) describes the “society of widows” that exists among widowed women. Due to the statistical difference in male and female life span, older widowed women often know many other women who have lost a spouse (Vinick, 1978). This creates many opportunities to build community. Thus, in the face of widowhood, women often grow apart from friends associated with their coupled status and begin to forge new friends and communities based on their new position as single women.

Widowhood also brings about changes in household responsibilities and finances, referred to as "instrumental changes" in the literature (Lopata, 1996). When widowed women are often called upon to take responsibility for household tasks that had previously been taken care of by their spouse. They may also be called up to manage financial matters and/or financially support themselves (Lopata). Instrumental changes in widowhood also result when woman cease providing caretaking roles for their husbands. These changes may be especially pronounced for women who were the primary caregivers for ill husbands. This significant change in the way a woman spends her time, and the responsibilities and tasks that are expected of her, have a profound effect (Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Davidson, 2001; Talbott, 1998): the reduction in caretaking responsibilities has been found to impact everything from the physical health of widowed women, showing improved overall physical health (Murrell, Himmelfarb, & Phifer, 1995) to overall sense of freedom (Davidson).

Instrumental changes tend to have the most significant impact on women when there was a high degree of instrumental dependence within the marriage. Thus, as women increasingly enter the workforce and become significant wage earners within families, the economic impact of widowhood is lessened (Cooney & Dunne, 2001). This financial impact is also found to decrease for older adults who are no longer working and are not supporting children (Cooney & Dunne; Lopata, 1996). Thus while the instrumental impact of widowhood is still a reality, it may be lessened by the changes in strict gender roles regarding work inside and outside the home, and by similar changes that result from aging (Lopata,).

Finally, widowhood creates significant personal and emotional changes as women cope with loss and grief. Changes in a woman's sense of herself, or self-concept, also arise as she adjusts to the loss of her personal and social role as a wife (Lopata, 1996). Lopata writes that “how much a woman’s self-concept is disorganized by the death of her husband depends on similar factors that influence the degree of disorganization of her life: the degree of her dependence on him, on her married life, and on being a married woman for how she defined herself” (Lopata, p. 97).

Clearly, widowhood creates significant changes in women’s lives that are both profound and diverse. It can have a significant emotional impact, can cause major instrumental disorganization, can challenge and redefine relationships, and can disrupt a woman’s self-concept. These can be painful and stressful experiences. Despite this pain much of the literature on widowhood identifies the personal growth that can come from this experience (Carr, 2004; Lopata, 1979, 1996; Vinick, 1978). This personal growth and the impact it has on women's autonomy, self-efficacy, competence and self-reliance is important to consider in assessing women's perceived independence in repartnership: lessons learned in widowhood are part of the foundation upon which the repartnership is built and can help clinicians create useful interventions when working with these women.

#### *Impact of Widowhood on Autonomy, Self-efficacy, Self-reliance and Competence*

Numerous authors writing about women's experiences of widowhood have found that women's sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, self-reliance, and competence increase when they are widowed and that these changes often result in an increase in perceived independence and self-esteem (Carr 2004; Davidson 2001; de Jong Gierveld, 2002; Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Moorman, Booth & Fingerman, 2006).

When widowed, women often report having an increased sense of freedom and autonomy (Davidson 2001; de Jong Gierveld 2002; Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Talbott 1998). According to Davidson, this sense of freedom is both a result of "the absence of the need to give care" to a spouse (p. 300) and of "doing what they wanted, when they wanted and not having to consider the needs of a partner" (p. 307).

Other authors have found that the instrumental changes that arise in widowhood can provide women with the chance to learn and master new skills (Cooney and Dunne, 2001; Lopata, 1996). This process of learning and mastery is central to the increase in self-esteem and feeling of personal growth associated with late life widowhood (Carr, 2004; Cooney and Dunne; Lopata; Moorman, Booth & Fingerman, 2006; O'Bryant, 1994). Cooney and Dunne found that women with more social support reported less personal growth during widowhood. While the authors did not specify what types of personal growth they were measuring, they understood that as a result of the high level of instrumental support these women had, they had not been forced to learn new skills in order to care for themselves and had thus not achieved the mastery associated with increased self-esteem. The learning and mastery of new skills also provides widowed women with an increased sense of self-reliance and self-sufficiency (Carr; de Jong Gierveld, 2002). Thus, as women learn to take care of the tasks and responsibilities that their spouses previously assumed, they gain an increased sense of competence in their abilities to learn and master new information and skills and a stronger sense of self-reliance as their ability to care for themselves grows.

Finally, the process of practically and psychologically adjusting to widowhood has been found to increase women's sense of self-efficacy (Carr, 2004; Cooney & Dunne,

2001). The process of making the necessary changes in one's life include several alternations: Lopata (1996) notes that one change is adaption to being alone and Carr highlights the process of finding the personal strength to withstand the emotional pain and challenge of the adjustment to widowhood. These processes can both increase one's sense of efficaciousness.

This increase in self-efficacy is also attributed to the mastery and increased freedom and autonomy discussed previously (Cooney & Dunne, 2001). Changes in autonomy, self-reliance, competence, and self-efficacy all lead to an overall increase in independence in widowhood. As a result of these changes Gentry & Shulman's (1988) study on re-marriage as a coping response in widowhood found that over one third of the sample did not want to remarry because they did not want to relinquish their independence. Similarly, Davidson (2001) found that women enjoyed this sense of freedom and autonomy they gained in widowhood and identified their wish to hold onto the independence they gained during their widowhood as their primary reason for not wanting to repartner. Davidson also found that women felt guilty for enjoying this freedom and believed that this freedom was selfish. Thus, the literature shows that while women frequently evaluated their increased independence favorably, they did not always perceive their enjoyment of it as positive. Davidson attributes this to gender socialization: women are taught that the caretaker role is their most important, valuable role. Issues related to gender socialization as they related to independence will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

The literature demonstrates that women often experience increased independence in widowhood. This increase is caused by changes in self-reliance and competence



resulting from 1) the mastery of new skills, 2) increased autonomy as a result of no longer having to care for or be responsible to a partner and 3) the increased self-efficacy resulting from the practical and psychological adjustment to widowhood.

Despite these widowhood gains some of these women choose to repartner. As the focus of this thesis is on widowed women's perceptions of independence in repartnering, the following section will review literature on late-life repartnering. This will enhance understanding of the experience of those entering into new relationships in later life.

### Late Life Repartnering

Late life repartnering is a statistically uncommon and little studied topic. Literature on the topic has attempted to understand the prevalence of repartnering, reasons for repartnering, nature of these relationships, and benefits of such relationships. The conclusions drawn from this small body of literature is discussed below.

#### *Prevalence and Obstacles*

Late life repartnering is much more common for men than for women (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986). This difference is most commonly attributed to the differences in mortality rates among men and women, such that there are more older single women than men (Gentry & Shulman, 1988). It has also been explained by the fact that our social norms make it more acceptable for men at all ages to marry younger women (Walby, 1995). Others argue that the reason men repartner at much higher rates than women in later life is because they benefit more from these relationships than women do (Gentry & Shulman; Gove 1972; Vinick, 1978). Gentry and Shulman cite the finding that men have a statistically lower mortality rate when repartnered while women's mortality shows little

change. Davidson (2002) discusses women's reserve to provide physical and household caretaking for a partner as another reason they tend to repartner less frequently than men.

There are also social pressures that may prevent women from becoming repartnered. Gentry and Shulman (1998) write that older women “live in an age-graded society in which there are certain expectations about what an age groups members should do and these expectations preclude older women being thought of as sexual beings” (p. 195). Social attitudes toward dating in later life remain predominantly negative (McElhaney, 1992) and older courtship may be influenced and prevented by these outside opinions. Moorman et al. (2006) state that older women may feel pressure to remain single “to avoid labels such as *sexually immodest* and *out to steal someone's husband*” (p. 1298), which arise from the stigma against elder sexuality and the assumption that older women will remain widowed. Negative family responses to repartnership, mentioned previously, may also prevent older women from repartnering.

Though these social obstacles are influential, a review of the literature reveals that women's contentment with their single widowed status may be the major factor preventing many women from repartnering (Davidson, 2001; Davidson, 2002; Gentry & Shulman, 1988; Talbott, 1998). Gentry and Shulman found that 36% of their participants were uninterested in re-marriage and cited their positive experience of independence as the main reason for this disinterest. Davidson found that “freedom from having to look after someone” (p. 315) was the number one reason women were uninterested in repartnering, and Talbott found that many women expressed a disinterest in compromising the freedom of widowhood for a new relationship. It appears that the

increased freedom of widowhood is a positive experience for many women and leaves them disinterested in pursuing new relationships.

Finally, several authors have identified the tendency to sanctify the late husband (Lopata, 1996) as a further disincentive to repartnership. Concerns about possible disloyalty to the late spouse (Gentry and Shulman, 1988) or concerns that no one will be able to take the place of the lost spouse (Davidson, 2002) may inspire further disinterest in repartnership. Despite all the obstacles a small percentage of women do enter into various forms of repartnerships in later life.

#### *Motivation for Repartnership*

Considering all the obstacles previously mentioned the question arises of what it is that motivates women to repartner? It appears that one of the most significant reasons widowed women seek repartnership is the desire for companionship (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986; Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Talbott, 1998; Vinick, 1978). While it appears that men long for companionship within the home, women are often more interested in finding companionship when they are outside the home (Davidson, 2002; Talbott). They miss their identity as a couple and are interested in finding someone with whom they can engage in couples' social activities (Davidson).

The literature also cited increased self-esteem and social status as a motivation to repartner. Due to the scarcity of single men in late life (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986) and the tendency in our culture for women to define themselves and gain self-worth through their attractiveness to men (Lopata, 1996), women often report increased feelings of self-esteem when they repartner in late life. Increased financial security and decreased stress are also potential motivators for new relationships (Cooney & Dunne, 2001). Finally,

while many women experience increased independence in widowhood, others may see opportunities for increased independence in repartnership. For instance coupling with a partner who drives a car may increase a woman's mobility and recreational opportunities. Having a companion with whom to share activities may increase a woman's sociability (Davidson, 2002).

### *Nature of Repartnership*

Post-widowhood repartnerships take many different forms. They may take the form of remarriage, non-married cohabitation, long-term non-cohabitation or dating (Cooney & Dunne, 2001). Researchers studying both married and non-married repartnership have found that the desire for companionship (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986; Vinick, 1978) and emotional intimacy (de Jong Gierveld, 2002; Karlsson & Borell, 2002) are the major factors motivating repartnership in women. Bulcroft and O'Connor found in their seminal study on dating relationships in older adults that the dating partner, (dating is defined as a committed long-term relationship) tended to fulfill the role of 1) friend and companion 2) confidant 3) romantic partner 4) caregiver.

While Bulcroft and O'Connor (1986) found that both men and women looked for companionship in a partner, others have found differences between what men and women want in repartnership: some researchers have found that men tend to seek a companion in the home while women often seek a companion to do things with outside of the home (Davidson, 2002). Both Davidson and Bulcroft and O'Connor have found that while women seek emotional intimacy and sharing in repartnership, their tendency to find this emotional support in friendships makes the need less primary for women than for men. While romance and sexuality are identified as important aspects of most late life

repartnerships, researchers have found that romantic or sexual intimacy is more difficult to define in later life and is found to be less important than companionship (Bulcroft & O'Connor; Moorman, Booth & Fingerman, 2006).

Finally, Bulcroft and O'Connor (1986) looked at the role of caregiving in late life dating relationships. They found that the importance of financial, physical, and instrumental caregiving support was less important than anticipated and that emotional support was the most important form of mutual aid provided by dating partners. This has been re-iterated by researchers looking at non-cohabiting relationships. These studies found that emotional care and companionship were the most significant forms of support provided and that women often hesitated to become involved in relationships where they would be required to provide physical, instrumental, or financial care (de Jong Gierveld, 2002, 2004; Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Talbott, 1998).

In summary, research on the nature of late-life repartnership shows that these relationships can take many different forms and that the primary function of these relationships is companionship. Emotional sharing and romantic involvement are also important factors in these relationships. The literature also shows that, while generalizations can be drawn about these relationships, it is important to note the wide diversity existing in both the nature and function of these relationships (Talbott, 1998).

### Women's Negotiation of Independence in Late-Life Repartnership

There is very little scholarship looking directly at women's negotiation of independence in late-life repartnership. The literature that does mention independence typically cites older women's common disinterest in repartnership due to their enjoyment

of independence gained in widowhood (Davidson, 2001; Davidson, 2002; Gentry & Shulman, 1988, Talbott, 1998). Recently, however, a new body of research has begun to develop that looks more directly at the negotiation of independence in late-life repartnership. This research specifically examines non-cohabiting intimate relationships, called living-apart-together (LAT) relationships. Much of the literature investigates the ways in which LAT relationships allow older women to maintain the independence gained during widowhood while simultaneously enjoying the intimacy and companionship of a relationship (de Jong Gierveld, 2002, 2004; Karlsson & Borell, 2002). Women's increased independence, competence and self-reliance and their satisfaction with having survived the loss of a spouse influence their desire to hold onto the independence they gained in widowhood. The benefits also increase their sense of self-efficacy in negotiating boundaries that preserve this independence (de Jong Gierveld). Karlsson and Borell have found that LAT relationships are motivated by women's desire to balance their autonomy with companionship and intimacy. They have found that having one's own home is an important boundary-setting tool that prevents women from needing 1) to domestically care for their partners, 2) to assume a traditional female dominated allocation of household tasks, or 3) to change the domestic habits to which they have grown accustomed as a single person. Karlsson and Borell have also found that women assert their autonomy by having independent finances and generally few shared or jointly owned resources.

The autonomy that is preserved in LAT relationships decreases the caretaking responsibilities that are expected of each partner (de Jong Gierveld, 2002, 2004; Karlsson & Borell, 2002). This is of particular significance in late-life repartnership where the

prospect of caring for an ill and enfeebled partner is a likely reality, especially for women who tend to outlive their male partners (Karlsson & Borell). Several studies showed that becoming a caretaker for an ill spouse was a major concern expressed by women considering repartnership (Davidson, 2002) and influenced women's decisions to create the boundaries and separate living arrangements of their LAT relationships (de Jong Gierveld; Karlsson & Borell).

The result of this LAT negotiation is that people are able to have the mutual care, attention, support, and companionship while maintaining their autonomy of time and living space. In addition it could reduce some of the challenges, for instance the inequity of time, care, and household responsibilities, and the complications of blending families, homes, and inheritance associated with repartnership (de Jong Gierveld, 2004). LAT relationships, therefore, are driven by the shared emotional and companionate connection and are not influenced by the structural bonds (i.e. shared home, finances, responsibilities) that frequently influence married couples.

Literature on LAT relationships is the only research found that looks directly at the ways in which women in late-life repartnerships seek to maintain the independence gained during widowhood while also forging intimacy and companionship. As societal definitions of relationships become more flexible, it is likely that these varying relationship structures will become more common (de Jong Gierveld, 2002, 2004; Karlsson & Borell, 2002) and that women's negotiation of independence in repartnership will gain increased attention.

## Women's Independence in Relationships

Now that literature on women's independence in repartnership has been reviewed, I will look briefly at literature on women's overall independence in romantic relationships, focusing both on the impact of gender socialization on women's independence in relationships and on the historical influences that have shaped these dynamics. While women are increasingly asserting their autonomy and independence in repartnership, a review of literature on the history of women's independence in relationships finds that women have, traditionally, lost autonomy and independence in romantic relationships, especially in marriage (Bernard, 1972; Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre, & Matheson, 2003; Boynton, 2003; Davidson, 2001). Literature discussing this traditional loss of independence will be reviewed, as will literature discussing changes that have arisen in women's relational independence.

### *Women's Loss of Independence in Relationships*

Feminist scholars have identified the tendency for women to lose independence, autonomy, and control in romantic relationships with men (Bernard, 1972; Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre, & Matheson, 2003; Boynton, 2003; Chodorow, 1978; Davidson, 2001). Chodorow attributes this loss to the social construction and learning of gender in which women are taught to be caretakers. She explains that while men are socialized occupationally, with a focus on production and professional skill building over relationships with others, women are taught that relationships, and caring for others both physically and emotionally, is their primary purpose. This socialization and the gender roles that result easily lead to the inequity and abandonment of independence described



by other authors. Boynton, in her review of contemporary relationship self-help literature, describes how women are "encouraged to abandon independence when it comes to heterosexual relationships, reinforcing old-style gender stereotypes, reducing women to a passive role, and insisting that men 'take control'" (Boynton, p. 238). Similarly, Davidson describes the 1950's cultural ideal of heterosexual relationships in which "husbands were expected to be 'honored and obeyed' and their wishes came first, it was seen as in the marriage contract and accepted " (Davidson, p. 306). Gender role socialization (Chodorow), and the cultural influences described by Boynton and Davidson all play a part in constructing patriarchal dynamics within heterosexual relationships in which women lose independence.

Despite the influence of patriarchal gender dynamics within heterosexual relationships, there are exceptions to this rule. Holloway (2004) criticizes feminist literature that looks exclusively at women's oppression in relationships without also acknowledging what can be gained. She proposes a relational dynamic of mutuality: mutual compromise, support, work, and caretaking, which, she believes, can allow women to be independent while being in relationship.

The contrasting views of women's autonomy in relationships are grounded in changing notions of gender relations, gender roles, and female autonomy. In order to understand the context within which women's autonomy in relationships exists and the unique generational experiences and values of the cohort of this study, literature discussing this historical context will be briefly reviewed.

### *Historical Shifts in Women's Independence in Relationships*

Other authors have discussed historical changes that they see impacting women's autonomy in relationships. Women who were in young adulthood during the 1950's were in a unique generational position (Karlsson & Borell, 2002). They were exposed to the social upheaval of WWII, and the post-war social movement of the 1950's that attempted to reconstitute domestic life by placing primary focus on the nuclear family (Davidson, 2002). During this period a distinct boundary between public and private spheres was drawn. The home was seen as the domain of women and strict gender roles that cast women as the homemakers and men as breadwinners were firmly established (Davidson; Karlsson & Borell).

Women in this generation were also exposed to the increased movement of women into workplace. As women took on paid work outside of the home they became increasingly financially independent (Cooney & Dunne, 2001). They also frequently took on a "second shift" of work, working outside the home during the day and continuing to do the majority of household work (Karlsson & Borell, 2002). The strains on the previous model of family life caused by women's entry into the workforce caused women to begin to question this model of family and gender roles and with this came an increase in "efforts to create more autonomous and equal relationships, both inside and outside the framework of marriage" (Karlsson & Borell, p. 24).

These changes took shape and grew in strength throughout the 1960's with the rise of the women's movement (Davidson & Fennell, 2002). During this time changing attitudes toward women's sexuality, sexual practices, marriage and gender roles, as well

as an increase in divorce began to shift people's notion of relationships and women's roles (Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Talbott, 1998).

The multiple social events and changes discussed have all shaped the concept of gender roles in family, work, and relationships. Thus while women have traditionally lost independence in heterosexual relationships (Bernard, 1972; Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre, & Matheson, 2003; Boynton, 2003; Chodorow, 1978; Davidson, 2001), and may continue to forfeit autonomy in such relationships (Boynton) they have also been exposed to social changes that have placed increased emphasis on female autonomy and independence within relationships (Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Davidson, 2001; Hollway, 2004; Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Talbott, 1998).

#### Aging: The Impact of Life Stage on Independence

Images of elderly people as infirm, disabled and dependent abound in our society (Arber & Evandrou, 1993; Arber & Ginn, 1991). We tend to focus on the deficits of aging associated with physical changes and loss of ability rather than looking at those things that are gained in this life stage (Arber & Evandrou). In Arber and Evandrou's book on aging and independence they challenge this reductive and pathologizing approach to research on aging. They consider three primary domains of life stage change 1) transitions from paid work, 2) changes in family roles and living situation and 3) changes in health status and care needs. While they acknowledge that some of these changes can cause decreases in independence they highlight the many ways in which independence can increase at this life stage. Laslett (1989) take a similar view of aging in his discussion of the "third age". The "third age" describes the time between retirement

and physical decline in which people can experience increased leisure time, activity, learning, and independence. While this notion has been criticized by some for representing a distinctly middle class privilege, it represents an alternative perspective to the deficit models of aging that are commonly presented (Arber & Evandrou).

In challenging the notion of aging as decline, Arber and Evandrou (1993) also challenge our belief that with aging comes an inevitable loss of independence. While it is true that certain physical changes and impairments that occur as people age may impact physical independence they discuss the multi-faceted nature of independence. They identified three distinct dimensions of independence 1) physical independence - the ability to care for the self; 2) autonomy – the capacity for self-direction and free choice; and 3) reciprocity or interdependence - the feeling that you are not reliant on another without also giving back to them. Using this multi-dimensional notion of independence Arber and Evandrou found that feelings of independence could be maintained despite factors that impact independence in one of these dimensions. The researchers also challenged the traditional dichotomy between dependence and independence and argue that these concepts should be understood as existing on a spectrum in which reciprocity and interdependence are included.

Arber and Evandrou (1993) and others challenge the traditional notion that later life is marked by infirmity, decline, and deficit and consequently a decrease in independence. While physical changes of aging impact the lives of older adults there is the potential to maintain a sense of independence on other dimensions and to continue to grow in spite of these changes.

## Perceived Independence

### *Subjective Nature of Perceived Independence*

There is literature on the nature of independence that examines the topic as a subjective experience shaped by multiple psychosocial factors (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Sheldon et. al 2005). Deci and Ryan's discussion of the universal needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness found that autonomy was influenced by a variety of socio-cultural, attitudinal, and personality factors, and was, therefore, accomplished in very different ways. Thus autonomy and competence, two central facets of independence, have been seen as subjective concepts.

### *Subjectivity and Social Constructionism*

The concept of subjectivity has been discussed in depth in postmodern literature from a wide variety of disciplines. While it is outside the scope of this literature review to discuss this literature in-depth it is important to briefly outline the post-modern concept of subjectivity in order to fully understand the subjective nature of perceived independence.

Mahoney and Yngvesson (1992) look at feminist concepts of subjectivity. They have found that many feminist theorists have used a Lacanian concept of subjectivity and focused on the role that language plays in shaping subjective realities and identities. They believe that individuals have different and changing notions of themselves and the world that are shaped and constructed by language (Butler, 1990; Olson, 2005). Mahoney and Yngvesson also identify the role that relationships, especially early life relationships, have in shaping our subjective sense of reality, self and other.

Other post-modern theorists have looked at the concept of social construction to illuminate the highly subjective nature of identity and ideas. In Gergen's (1985) paper on the social constructionist movement he writes that "Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (p. 266). According to Gergen social constructionism challenges the positivist notion that objective knowledge is attainable and purports that all knowledge, all understandings of the world and concepts about its functioning, are constructed by people and through our interactions with one another. Thus, objective reports, concepts, or experiences are impossible to attain. Our experiences in life and ideas about life are inherently subjective and influenced by the people with whom we relate and social structures in which we exist (Gergen; Olson, 2005).

Post-modern thought has illuminated the highly subjective nature of human experience and called into question our positivist assumptions about objective truth (Butler, 1990; Gergen, 1985; Olson, 2005; Mahoney & Yngvesson, 1992). Literature discussing human needs and desires for independence has found that the very notion of independence and autonomy is also a highly subjective concept (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Sheldon et. al, 2005). This literature on the subjective nature of perceived independence will guide this studies exploration of women's feelings of independence in repartnership.

## Attachment, Separation Individuation, and the Capacity to be Alone

Three object relational theories, 1) Bowlby's (1969) theory of primary attachment, 2) Winnicott's (1958) notion of positive introjects and the capacity to be alone, and 3) Mahler's (1972) theory of the developmental process of separation individuation, will serve as the theoretical foundation of this study. When taken together, these related theories provide a developmental understanding of the complex tension between connection and separateness that lies at the heart of older women's negotiation of independence in late-life repartnering. Though they do not directly address adult relationships, they have been expanded upon and related to adult development by many theorists (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bradley & Cafferty, 2001; Kaplan, 1978); this literature is also reviewed.

### *Primary Attachment*

Attachment theory, first articulated by Bowlby (1969), states that the desire for relationships is a biologically hard-wired need that comes from the infant's requisite for protection and care giving as a means of survival. The extent to which an infant's needs are attuned to and adequately met by early attachment figures determines the security of the attachment bond formed and the attachment style that is developed. These early relationships and the subsequent attachment style shapes development across the lifespan and lays a groundwork upon which all future relationships are built (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 1991).

A secure attachment is one in which an infant's needs are sufficiently and consistently met. The child learns to trust that she will be nurtured by a consistent caregiver. This provides an environment where the child feels confident to explore her

environment, and thus develop a healthy sense of independence (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 1991). An insecure attachment may result from a lack of a safe base and leaves the child preoccupied with unmet needs for security and stability (Bowlby & Ainsworth). Though humans grow less dependant on caregivers for immediate survival as they age, the need for secure, consistent, protective relationships persist (Ainsworth & Bowlby).

Bowlby's theory of attachment presents a notion of psychic development that is relational. Rather than becoming who we are through the gratification of impulses and conflict between these impulses, as earlier Freudian theorists believed, object relations theorists came to believe that the self develops through processes of relatedness and connectedness. Chodorow (1989) describes process through which our relationships with important others are incorporated, or "introjected" into the self. She purports that individual development is guided by the process of relating to important others and incorporating aspects of these others into the self. This theoretical shift, which frames human development as an inherently social process and people, therefore, as inherently related beings, lays the groundwork for understanding the late life negotiation of independence and connection that is the focus of this study.

#### *Separation Individuation and the Capacity to be Alone*

Following on the work of Bowlby, other theorists sought to understand the ways in which infants move from this infantile state of union with caregivers to become independent and differentiated beings. Winnicott (1958) addressed this question in his paper on the capacity to be alone. In it he sought to understand how children develop an ability to be alone and found that this capacity develops out of the process of being alone with another, having one's needs consistently met by them, and incorporating positive



and soothing aspects of the other into the self. Through this process the child develops an ability to hold the safe and caring other, the good object, internally and is thus able to tolerate being alone.

Mahler (1972) articulated a related theoretical concept in which children develop increasing levels of separation and individuation through the internalization of a secure attachment in her theory of separation individuation. Through a series of developmental phases children become aware of their differentiation from their primary caregiver, practice moving away from and returning to this secure base, and eventually attain object constancy in which they are able to hold a benign and stable representation of the caregiver internally.

During the most conflicted sub-phase of this developmental process, rapprochement, children are caught in a state of "ambitendency", in which they are consumed by intense and competing wishes: "the wish to be close and the wish to be separate – and the two enduring, intense fears – the fear of engulfment and the fear of abandonment" (Berzoff, Melano, Flanagan & Hertz, 2002, p. 162). The developmental goal of this phase is to learn that being close with caregivers need not bring about a loss of self and that being distant does not signify abandonment (Berzoff, Melano, Flanagan & Hertz, p.163). Children, thus, come to negotiate the complicated balance of togetherness and separateness and, through the presence of secure attachments and internalization of these attachments, grow towards sufficient differentiation and independence (Blum, 2004). It is important to acknowledge that Mahler's theory of separation individuation has been criticized for being culturally biased. Berzoff, Melano, Flanagan and Hertz identify the Western, White, middle class and male belief system

espoused by this theory and state that the level of individuation and autonomy deemed necessary for healthy development may not be applicable to all cultures.

Despite this cultural bias, the above-mentioned literature on separation individuation and the capacity to be alone illuminate the important fact that independence is gained, not by the negation of attachment, but through attachment (Blum, 2004; Chodorow, 1989). People learn to be independent in relationship with those caretakers who are most important to them and through the developmental process of incorporating aspects of the other into the self (Chodorow). This shows us that people can individuate in relationship and that an individuated self is not a self without relationship, but quite the opposite. It is a self comprised partly of internalized aspects of others and humans continue to negotiate these relationships even after differentiation (Chodorow). This theory illuminates the central tension, persistent throughout development, between connection and separation and is a helpful theoretical foundation for understanding the coinciding desires for companionship and independence that are often seen in older women's discussions of post-widowhood repartnership.

#### *Attachment and Separation Individuation in Adult Life*

While the literature on attachment and the developmental process of individuation focuses on early life development, other authors have applied these theories to development across the lifespan. In reviewing the literature on late life connection, Bradley and Cafferty (2001) found that attachment relationships and styles that were internalized from childhood continue to impact people throughout life. These early attachments continue to influence patterns of relating and feelings of connection and independence throughout life. Other theorists, building off of attachment theory, have

discussed the "belongingness hypothesis" which extends early attachment theory across the lifespan (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chipuer, 2001). They discuss the human need throughout development to "form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). These relationships must be both affectively positive and relatively stable over time.

The object relational literature reviewed above highlights the essential human need for close, secure attachment and the related need to develop a clear sense of separation and individuation (Blum, 2004; Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby & Ainsworth, 1991; Chodorow, 1989; Mahler, 1972; Winnicott, 1958). While the developmental negotiation of these related needs is first negotiated during early childhood, they continue to exert influence across the lifespan (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby & Ainsworth; Bradley & Cafferty, 2001). This literature will serve as the theoretical foundation for this study and will help us to understand the themes of connection and independence that are the focus of this research.

### Summary

Widowhood is a very common experience for the elderly and is a major life change. The experience can be dominated by emotional pain and grief, but also may create changes such as increased self-confidence and perceived independence. While some women choose to remain single after being widowed, a minority chooses to repartner. These repartnerships can take on many different forms and may be motivated by a desire for companionship. Increasingly, literature shows that women who repartner are remaining in unmarried relationships and are choosing not to cohabitate with their

partners. These less conventional relationships are seen as women's attempts to maintain some of the independence they gained in widowhood while benefiting from the companionship and intimacy of a relationship.

The literature on widowhood, late life post-widowhood repartnership, and independence reviewed, along with a developmental understanding of human attachment and individuation, will serve as the guide for this study.

Historically women have struggled to maintain their independence in relationships. While the social changes of the 1960's and the women's movement have increased awareness about women's independence, the underlying expectation of women losing independence in relationships remains. This small qualitative study examined older widowed women's perceptions of independence when forging new romantic relationships.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This research study used an exploratory qualitative design to answer the following research question: what is the impact of post-widowhood repartnering on older women's sense of perceived independence? The definition of 'independence' initially used in this study was "the experience of autonomy, self-reliance, competence and self-efficacy" (Carr, 2004). An exploratory design was best suited for this study for two reasons. First, there is a dearth of previous research on the topic. Second, this study employed a small sample size and thus generalizability is limited. It was also believed that the iterative process facilitated by a flexible method design would be the most effective means of uncovering and exploring older women's personal perspectives on the research topic (Anastas, 1999). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from ten repartnered women. The data were collected in 45-minute 1:1 in-person interviews in which participants were asked a series of open-ended questions. The data from these interviews were then transcribed, coded and analyzed thematically.

#### Sample

Because of the exploratory nature of the study a purposive sample was used to obtain the respondents. In all, ten women were interviewed. Inclusion criteria for the

sample were 1) heterosexual women who had lost a spouse and had become repartnered at the age of 65 or older; 2) at least two years had to have passed since the death of the spouse; 3) the women had to be living semi-independently (in terms of needing elderly care), either in personal apartments, in retirement communities, or in their own homes; 4) the women could not have been diagnosed with dementia or other cognitive impairments; and 5) the women's primary language was English. Rationale for the inclusion and exclusion criteria are as follows: 1) exclusions based on sexual orientation were made due to the nature of the study and the research focus. It was believed that additional factors specific to homosexuality and homophobia could complicate the findings and were outside the scope of this modest research study; 2) rationale for exclusion based on gender were similar to those for sexual orientation. Much of the literature showed that the experiences of male and female widows varied significantly. In addition, the study focused on female participants because, due to differences in mortality rates by gender and gender socialization. Women and men have very different experiences of widowhood, repartnership and independence (Cooney and Dunne, 2001) and to investigate these differences was outside the scope of this study; 3) the lower age cutoff of the participants was chosen because at age 65 repartnership is a viable option for both men and women (considering gender mortality rates at age 65), yet people are beginning to experience many age related issues relevant to this study (Moorman, Booth & Fingerman 2006, p. 1299); 4) participants with cognitive impairments were screened out because memory loss can compromise self-reported data; 5) non-English speaking participants were screened out due to the native language of this researcher and small scope of study.

## Recruitment

A snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants. Colleagues and acquaintances were approached and given the inclusion criteria for the study. Once potential research participants were identified and had agreed to be contacted, they were called or e-mailed, provided with complete information about the nature of the study, participation, confidentiality guidelines, and screened to ensure that they met this study's inclusion criteria. Once their eligibility and interest in participation was assured, an interview was scheduled at a confidential location of their convenience. At the end of each interview participants were asked if they knew any other women who met the study's inclusion criteria and who might be interested in participating.

## Ethics and Safeguards

Participant confidentiality was protected in order to ensure participants' rights to privacy and to facilitate open sharing of personal information. This protection enhanced the validity of the study by supporting participants' honesty and transparency when sharing narrative data. Confidentiality of participants was safeguarded in the following ways: 1) identifiable information was disguised during the transcription process by removing names and replacing them with code numbers; 2) identifying information and names in illustrative vignettes and quoted comments were disguised and replaced with alternative names and identifiers; 3) all identifiable information, such as consent forms and code numbers with names, were kept separate from the data in a locked file; 4) transcription was completed by this researcher only; 5) All data and audio recordings are

being held in a secure location for three years as required by the Federal regulations governing such research. After three years, if the data are no longer needed, it will be destroyed per Federal guidelines.

### Data Collection

The design of this study was approved by the Smith College, School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (see Appendix A). Informed consent forms were given to participants at the time of the interviews and were explained to each participant to ensure their understanding (see Appendix B). These forms described the purpose of the study, the risks and benefits of participation, the confidentiality guidelines, and the inclusion criteria.

Data were collected in 45 minute, in person interviews with ten women who met selection criteria for the study and who had signed the informed consent material prior to the interview. Semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate and effective method of data collection for this exploratory study because they allow for the collection of rich narrative data that contributed a greater understanding to a little researched topic (Anastas, 1999). This interview format also supported an iterative research process in which the questions grew and changed as the data collection proceeded. This enabled me to obtain the desired information.

The interview guide was piloted prior to use on a woman who was not a participant in the study. This was done in order to determine the reliability and effectiveness of the questions. Each interview was audio-recorded and additional notes were taken to record immediate impressions and non-verbal content. Once each interview



was completed it was transcribed and initial themes and codes were identified and recorded. Interview questions were re-evaluated after transcription and initial coding to assess whether they were eliciting the desired information and, in keeping with a flexible method study, were revised and improved throughout the process in order to most effectively address the research question.

The interview guide for this study (see Appendix C) began with a series of demographic questions including age, race/ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, work and education history. Participants were then asked a series of questions about their family and relationship history including age first married, number of times married, duration of first marriage, number of children, date when widowed, duration of time alone, date when repartnered, and duration and nature of repartnership. The remainder of the interview was comprised of open-ended questions organized around the following eight themes: 1) negotiation of shared and separate time, activities, space, resources, tasks and friendships in repartnership; 2) decision making in repartnership; 3) accommodation and compromise in repartnership; 4) perceived independence in repartnership; 5) perceived independence in previous marriage; 6) perceived independence during widowhood and time spent alone. Follow-up and probing questions were asked to identify and clarify emerging themes and important topics.

### Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed by this researcher onto a Word program on a computer. Line by line coding was completed for each interview. Meaning units were identified and grouped. Meaning units were then used to identify emerging themes. After

all interviews were completed all transcripts were re-read and re-coded to enhance existing themes and identify new themes. These were then organized into six overarching thematic concepts.

### Summary

In this exploratory qualitative study data looking at older women's perceived independence in post-widowhood repartnership were gathered from ten participant interviews. Interview data was transcribed, coded and analyzed thematically. The results of these findings will be reported on in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The objective of this exploratory study was to investigate the impact of repartnership on older women's feelings of independence. This chapter will present data collected from interviews conducted with ten women who were widowed as older adults and subsequently repartnered. Based on previous literature and on gaps in the literature a series of interview questions focused on the following areas: perceived independence in 1) early life 2) previous marriage, 3) widowhood, and 4) repartnership. Only some of the findings gathered from these questions will be reported on due to the small scope of this research project. Specific questions were asked that further explored perceived independence in repartnership. These included questions about decision-making and compromise, shared vs. separate relationship domains, and how the impact of both partners aging affected feelings of independence in repartnership.

The following themes emerged from the interview questions and will be presented as follows: 1) demographic data; 2) the maintenance of a strong sense of perceived independence in repartnership; 3) the subjective nature of perceived independence 4) the choice to compromise independence for the benefits of repartnership; 5) the maintenance of autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-reliance in the face of compromise; 6) the establishment of boundaries to preserve perceived independence; 7) the benefits of

companionship; and 6) the strength of perceive repartnership independence when compared to previous marriages.

## Demographic Data

### *Participant Demographics*

Respondents ranged in age from 73-93 with a mean age of 81.5. All participants were Caucasian. All were of varying Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian descent except for one participant who was Eastern European Jewish. Six respondents were living in their own apartments or condominiums within retirement communities and four were living in their own homes. Seven participants described themselves as middle class and three as upper-middle class. Five women had graduate degrees, four had bachelor's degrees and one had graduated from high school and attended a secretarial training school. When discussing their work history, three women reported that they had worked outside the home consistently throughout their younger lives, the remaining women reported that they had not worked when their children were young but had worked either intermittently or more consistently after their children had grown.

### *Family and Repartnership Demographics*

All participants had been married prior to repartnership and one participant had been married twice previously. The age of first marriage ranged from 20 to 33 with a mean age of 24. These previous marriages ranged in duration 20-49 years with a mean duration of 41.7 years. All participants had birthed and raised 2-4 children in their previous marriages. After their spouses died all respondents spent some time alone before repartnering; the shortest length of time alone lasted less than 1 year and the longest

reached 10 years. Four subjects described the status of their repartnership as married, one as unmarried cohabitation, four as dating, and one as an 'affair'. The sample was comprised of women who were currently repartnered and several women who were reflecting retrospectively on past repartnerships. At the time of interview, four interviewees were currently married, two were dating, and one was in an unmarried cohabiting relationship. Three participants were no longer repartnered, two due to the death of their partner and one due to chosen termination on the part of her partner. These three participants were, therefore, reflecting on their past repartnership during the interviews. All four married participants and one unmarried participant were living with their partners. The four interviewees who were or had been dating and one who had been in an affair were not living with their partners.

#### A Strong Sense of Perceived Independence in Repartnership

All participants were asked a series of questions about their perceived level of independence in repartnership. The large majority of participants reported having a strong sense of independence in their repartnership, especially when compared with their previous marriages. This nearly unanimous response was notable given the diversity of repartnerships described. Participants were in married and unmarried repartnerships of varying durations and were living together and apart. There was wide variety in the way participants balanced tasks and activities of daily living in their relationships and in the way they described differing levels of compromise and connection in their relationships. Yet despite this wide variety, nearly all participants *felt* independent in their repartnerships. This highlights the subjective nature of perceived independence.

### *The Subjective Nature of Perceived Independence*

A definition of 'independence' used in this study was "the experience of autonomy, self-reliance, competence and self-efficacy" (Carr, 2004). However through examining the respondents' texts a different understanding of independence arose. Rather than being an objective state, independence was found to be a subjective experience, and therefore will be called 'perceived' independence.

Participants in relationships with widely differing levels of interdependence, interconnectedness, shared experiences, and resources had a strong sense of perceived independence. For the majority of participants strong perceived independence was achieved in the face of compromise. These participants felt independent in spite of choosing to make compromises in repartnership that impacted their sense of independence. They felt comfortable making such compromises in exchange for the benefits of companionship and were able to maintain a sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-reliance through (1) asserting choice in their relationships; (2) maintaining autonomy in myriad ways; 3) establishing mutuality in decision-making and accommodation. A fewer number of participants fell into a category of women who were less interested in compromising this independence for companionship and expressed a desire to hold onto the perceived independence they gained in their widowhood. These participants created stricter boundaries in their repartnerships, such as living separately and remaining unmarried, to preserve their sense of independence.

Thus while the majority of women maintained a strong sense of perceived independence, they negotiated this in different ways and conceived of their independence in different ways. Rather than being a universally defined state of being, perceived

independence was a subjectively defined concept. Some felt independent only when they achieved a state of autonomy and self-reliance in which they were not required to make compromises and accommodations to the extent they had in their earlier life. Others felt independent by maintaining a sense of autonomy, self-efficacy and self-reliance in the face of compromise.

*Needs for autonomy and attachment shape definitions of perceived independence*

It appeared from looking at the data that participants' subjective definitions of independence were often shaped by the level of autonomy and attachment they desired in repartnership. These levels of autonomy and attachment were related to the sense of autonomy and attachment they had experienced in their previous marriages . Some participants reported less need for attachment and more for autonomy in repartnership and also described a deeper level of attachment in their first marriage. These women chose not to compromise the level of perceived independence they gained during widowhood and defined perceived independence as a decreased need to compromise autonomy. One woman stated:

I like this man I'm seeing now very much, he's a very nice person a good person, I don't love him the way I loved my husband and I don't want to and I don't expect to.

Another participant, who described an "interdependent and loving connection" with her husband of forty-six years, discussed her partner's desire for deep closeness in repartnership. She reported:

I think he has some sense, some amorphous sense, of having more closeness. And I think it's a memory, a memory of a long marriage, and wanting to have that feeling again. And I don't think we can have that yet, or maybe never, I'm not sure. Because if you don't, I mean that's one of the qualities of marriage, and I'm not interested in marriage.

These two participants questioned the depth of connection they were interested in having in their repartnerships and linked this uncertainty to the depth of connection they had felt in their marriages. They were not looking for the level of attachment they previously had had and were disinterested in marriage or cohabitation as a result.

Other participants desired more attachment in repartnership and developed a sense of perceived independence in which greater levels of compromise were chosen. These women tended to reported high levels of autonomy and lower levels of closeness in their first marriages. One woman described her experience of repartnership:

In a way I didn't want to re-attach. But when I did I just fell in love that's all, and I feel like it's a deeper connection, a deeper sense of, well interdependence...I really want the closeness that can go with being together in the last years of our lives.

She went on to describe the differences in her two marriages:

I think though, with Mark [first husband] and I, we were more apt to move away from each other and move father and farther and farther and I think Dan and I are more apt to come to something together.

Another participant discussed a similar difference in the level of connection and sharing in her two marriages:

But this way, with David, I do share with him. I didn't share that much with my first husband.

Both of these women and were willing to compromise some aspects of their autonomy in exchange for the depth of attachment they desired. One woman reported that:

I've had to compromise and he's had to compromise. We both have had to be flexible.

The other reiterated this sentiment, describing her relationship as a "give and take" and marriage as a relationship in which a certain amount of independence is given up for the sake of "partnership".



The level of attachment versus autonomy emerged as an important factor in shaping participants' subjective senses of independence. Women who desired more attachment in repartnership than they had had in their first marriages defined perceived independence as the choice to compromise autonomy for attachment. Others who desired less attachment in repartnership defined perceived independence as maintaining strict boundaries around their autonomy.

*The Choice to Compromise Independence for Benefits of Companionship*

While the majority of women acknowledged that, in order to repartner, they had compromised aspects of the independence they had had when alone, all participants described having *chosen* to make such compromises. The fact that they had chosen to compromise rather than being forced to do so was a central aspect of their definition of perceived independence.

The majority of participants described discovering new aspects of independence as single women. One participant discussed the things she gained in the time she spent alone:

I've enjoyed some solitude, autonomy I think is the word. Making the decisions or not making them...choosing, doing what you want to do when you want to. Managing your time and your space. Learning to do new things, a sense of competence of doing things you hadn't done and thought you couldn't do.

However, the majority reported that they had chosen to give up certain aspects of autonomous decision-making they had when alone in order to be in a relationship and have companionship. While they acknowledged that these compromises affected their perceived independence as singles, they had *consciously* chosen to make such compromises.

### *Feelings about choice to compromise*

The majority of participants expressed comfort with making compromises in exchange for the benefits of companionship. They were willing to negotiate compromise, even when these compromises impacted their independence, in order to have the shared routines, activities, interests and intimacy of companionship and expressed the belief that the compromises they made were worth the gains they experienced. When asked whether it was a difficult decision to get re-married, one participant answered:

Well, was it difficult? Yes, in a way, I was independent after my first husband died, and that was a big thing to me, that I could be independent and go where I wanted to go... So I wouldn't say it was really difficult because I really did care for this man. I think it was the best decision I ever made [because of] well, the companionship for one thing.

Another participant described her concerns about compromising her freedom and her decision to do so:

Well I did think about it a lot, well actually he had so many things that could turn out to be terminal or that would make things difficult... And did I want to be a caregiver again, I really had to think about that, and I decided that it was such a chance for a wonderful life that I wasn't going to turn it down.

Still another woman discussed the small compromises she makes in her relationship to care for her husband and facilitate her own needs getting met. She expressed a comfort with making these concessions:

For example when I am going to my daughter's I usually leave after lunch, but if I'm leaving before lunch I always have to cut up his apple, that's what he has for lunch, an apple. And she says 'oh god mother what's the matter with you?' and I say I don't care, he can't cut it up because he doesn't really know how to carve it up and that's a little something I do for him to settle him so that he doesn't mind as much that I'm going out to meet you for lunch. So what does it do? And I realize that it doesn't hurt me to do that.

While these women acknowledged that the compromises they made to be in a relationship at times impacted their independence and impacted the level of autonomous

decision making they had had when single, the majority of the sample felt comfortable making these concessions in exchange for the benefits of companionship.

*Compromise is a part of life and relationship*

The majority of participants believed that compromises were a "part of life and relationships" and were willing to make such compromises in order to be in a relationship. One interviewee reported:

Well, as I get older I think that life is full of compromises...I mean if you just want one thing, which would be your own way, this is just not always possible to have.

Another participant expressed her belief that limitations imposed on her life by the needs of her spouse were not seen as sacrifices, but rather, an accepted part of life. She stated:

Well I could understand the limits of what my life was and what I had to do. Because there are a lot of times, you know some places I lived I didn't like as well and others that... all kinds of things. But I don't think I ever made any sacrifices.

Other participants expressed the belief that compromises that impact one's independence are inherent to being in a relationship. One woman stated:

You see, a marriage is a partnership, so you can't be completely independent if you're going to give anything to the marriage.

Another reported:

I couldn't be quite so independent with him because he was another human being who had to be considered. So that overall sense of "I'm the king of the universe, or queen in my sense" wasn't there in that relationship.

Even when being in a relationship impacted their sense of independence, these women were able to maintain an overall sense of autonomy and self-efficacy by exercising choice in their decision making and having open communication and mutual accommodation in their relationships. Thus, the majority of participants *chose* to make

compromises that impacted their independence in exchange for companionship but were able to maintain an overall strong perceived independence despite these compromises.

*Preserving Autonomy, Self-Efficacy and Self-Reliance in the Face of Compromise*

The participants who identified having chosen to compromise their independence for companionship did not report an overall weakened sense of perceived independence. While they had chosen to make concessions in their lives for the sake of companionship their overall perception of independence remained high. One participant acknowledged that she made compromises in her repartnership that limited her independence yet maintained an overall sense of independence in spite of such compromises:

I couldn't be quite so independent with him because he was another human being who had to be considered. So that overall sense of "I'm the king of the universe, or queen in my sense" wasn't there in that relationship. But, in my bigger life of having my house and visiting my children, that went on as usual. So that relationship didn't spoil the feeling of "I'm free, I can do what I want to do and wheee I'm doing it".

The majority of participants were able to maintain a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy and self-reliance despite making compromises in their repartnerships. They did so by asserting choice in life and relationship decisions, establishing open communication and mutuality in compromise, keeping separate resources and continuing to do separate activities that they enjoyed.

*Asserting autonomy in decision-making*

Having control over decisions that were personally important allowed participants to maintain a sense of autonomy despite compromising aspects of their independence in repartnership. This seemed to be different than in past partnerships. The majority of

participants felt that they had options within the repartnership that preserved their autonomy. One participant described her feeling of being in control of her decisions in her relationship by being advised but not being told what to do. She stated:

He would advise if I asked him a question but he never said you have to this or you have to do that.

Other participants discussed feeling that they had the option to assert control over their actions and make independent decisions about things that were most important to them. Sometimes these independent decisions required them not to compromise. A majority of women described having the power not to compromise on issues that were especially important to them. One woman, when discussing conflicts and compromises she and her husband made around her seeing her grandchildren, stated:

...Over the years we just resolved it [a conflict around her partner not wanting her to visit her children as much as she wanted to]. I said, you know, they're my kids and I'm going to go, I'm sorry. So I just go!

Another participant described a similar assertion of autonomy:

One of things I'm going to negotiate in the next month is that I want to go to Arizona and if he doesn't want to go, I'm going to go without him. I think he can handle that.

Feeling they had the option not to compromise on matters of utmost importance allowed women to preserve a sense of autonomy despite making compromises in their relationships.

#### *Assertion through mutuality and open communication*

Interviewees were able to maintain a sense self-efficacy in repartnership through the presence of open dialogue and mutual accommodation. This allowed them to feel that

they had the power to create change and assert influence in their lives while being in a relationship. All participants identified communication and discussion as the way that they made decisions within their relationship. They described different scenarios in which they and their partner each expressed their needs and thoughts and a decision was made jointly in which each party was considered and heard. One participant described this process and stated:

I think what we do, what I did in both relationships [first marriage and repartnership], is to figure out who has the most investment in each side of the argument and whoever has less will give in or give in partially, who is it most important to.

Another participant described a similar decision making process in which each person's voice is heard and considered. She stated:

I don't see we negotiate in a way, we just decide. You know 'what do you think, well what do you think'. Maybe that's negotiating, I guess it is.

Other woman described the process of mutual accommodation in their relationships, and described feeling that each member of the relationship was willing to be flexible and make compromises. One participant described the way that this process of give and take allowed her to feel she had a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy in her relationship that she had not had in her previous marriage. She reported:

I would say that my second marriage has worked very well because it is a give and take and it's not just one way where as my first husband ruled the roost and we did everything for his job and for what he wanted to do.

Other participants described decision making processes as "joined", "made together" and "shared". In all cases it was clear that dialogue and mutual accommodation allowed respondents to feel that they could effect change and be an active participant in decision

making processes within their relationships. Thus while being in a relationship affected aspects of their independence it did not decrease their overall sense of self-efficacy.

#### *Establishing financial boundaries*

All but one participant who chose to compromise their independence for the benefits of repartnership established boundaries around finances and shared resources. These boundaries allowed them to maintain a sense of self-reliance to autonomy. One respondent stated:

This man has his money and I have mine. And so if I want I don't have to say can I buy a new dress, I don't have to say can I afford this, I just do what I want to do and he does the same. That is very good.

For these women, having their own money allowed them to feel they could make autonomous decisions about how they spent their money and could support themselves financially. This allowed them to maintain a sense of self-reliance and autonomy while making compromises in repartnership.

#### *Maintaining independent activities*

All participants identified activities that they did independently of their partner. These activities helped women maintain an overall sense of independence despite making compromises in their relationship. One participant described these separate activities:

I go to a different church, we both like to get exercise but we don't exercise together too often. I go to aqua-aerobics and he was playing tennis up until very recently. He still walks every day.

Another participant described how she has continued to do some of the independent activities she did before she was repartnered. She stated:

We still have two cars. We still do a lot of things separately because we were doing that before we were married.

Other participants discussed their ability to be "apart when we're together". One woman stated that:

Even when he's here he doesn't seem to need to be right on my side all the time. If I'm doing something in the kitchen he'll go up and work on the computer and its okay.

Another participant reported:

Well we can be apart when we're together, I mean doing our own thing.

Maintaining independent activities and finding ways to be "apart when we're together" allowed participants to remain involved in activities that they enjoyed and continue to act independently in the world.

*Less time for independent activities*

Several participants acknowledged that they had less time for these independent activities since repartnering and were required to compromise their independent activities for their relationships. While they acknowledged that this was challenging, all had chosen to make these compromises and sacrifices for the benefits of the relationship. One participant identified the decreased time she had since her repartnership and reported that:

Since I hooked up with this man I seem to have very little time...I can't get my reading done.

Another discussed the time she had to spend with her friends after being repartnered:

I had a lot of friends and I was much more open than I was when I was married in seeing friends. And now I have to cut back on that, that is challenging.

While these participants identified that they had decreased time for their independent activities this appeared to be a choice they had made in exchange for the



benefits of companionship, a choice they were happy to make. One participant described her decision to structure her activities around her new relationship:

I guess I thought I could put them [her activities] in around this relationship.

In choosing to make such compromises participants preserved their autonomy. Thus while several participants felt they compromised their independent time and activities, all managed to preserve some independent time and felt they had chosen to make these compromises in exchange for their relationships and the companionship provided.

The findings demonstrate that women make compromises when they repartner. These compromises can impact women's independence and alter the level of independence they gained during their time alone. Despite making these compromises, the majority of women continued to *feel* independent, especially when compared with their first marriages. This was found to be a result of participants' abilities to maintain a sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-reliance in the face of relationship compromises. Through the assertion of choice, open dialogue, communication and mutual accommodation, and the preservation of financial independence and separate leisure activities women were able to *feel* independent while compromising aspects of their independence in order to be in a relationship.

#### *Establishing Boundaries to Limit Compromises of Independence*

While all participants identified making some compromises in order to be in a relationship, they expressed differing comfort levels with making accommodations and

were willing to compromise to varying extents. Some participants were less willing to make as many compromises and sacrifices in their repartnership as they had in their earlier lives. These participants expressed a wish to preserve some of the independence they had gained in their widowhood and chose to assert increased boundaries in their relationships in order to preserve this independence. One woman explained that:

I think in a long marriage, and living together and raising children, there is a lot of loving accommodation. I have not wanted to be so accommodating in this relationship because I want to pursue some of my own choices and desires. And the act of acting independently in the world has a certain invigoration, and so I don't totally want to lose that.

A second participant reiterated the sentiment, she said:

Well I'm glad to share myself to the level I do with this man, but I don't want that any more [*to be needed by another to the extent she was needed in her past marriage*]. It took me a long time to get used to like living alone and I don't want to give it up.

These women, a minority of the sample, chose to create boundaries that protected their personal space and level of attachment. These boundaries helped them to hold onto some of the independence they had gained in their time alone.

#### *Boundaries of space, commitment and resources*

Two participants reported that not getting married and continuing to live alone were important boundaries that helped them to maintain their perceived independence.

One woman described this in the following way:

Well I've said to him that I hope this weekend relationship is okay for him...it works perfectly for me. I love having company on the weekends and I love having the week to myself. So, I've made it very clear to him from the beginning that I was not interested in getting married again, I've been married I had a wonderful marriage I loved my husband dearly and so that's that and neither one of us wants to move, and we accept that in each other.

Another, in response to the question of how she asserts her independence stated:

Some time issues, not assuming traditional roles in terms of cooking, and living apart. That's a really big thing. Having one's own house.

These two participants both expressed a strong desire to continue to live alone and to remain unmarried. These boundaries allowed them to hold onto the independence that they had gained in widowhood.

In addition to boundaries of space and commitment, these participants also asserted boundaries regarding finances and shared resources, as did the 'compromising' group. This second category of women did make some compromises but they also established stricter boundaries that preserved much of the independence they had gained in widowhood. They conceived of independence as a maintenance of autonomy which required less compromise and the assertion of clear boundaries on space, commitment and finances.

### Benefits of Companionship

All participants made compromises in exchange for the benefits derived from repartnership. Interviewees discussed multiple benefits of companionship, most significant of which were positive shared routines, shared interests and activities, and intimacy.

#### *Positive Shared Routines*

All five participants who were living with their partners and one who had not been in a cohabiting relationship discussed the daily routines they shared with their partners in a positive light. One woman described this daily routine:

I would say by 5 o'clock we are all home, and that is our time. We have a glass of wine before dinner and look at the news or we may sit on the back porch and catch up with what happened during the day and then we have dinner.

Another described a similar routine:

I guess cocktail time is our biggest, that's our time when we tell each other what we did all day. And it lasts until, well, we always watch the Lehrer report at 6:30.

All six women who discussed such shared routines expressed positive feelings about them. One such participant stated:

We always enjoy getting back here and reconnecting and catching up with each other.

### *Shared Interests and Activities*

All participants, both cohabiting and living apart, described the activities and interests they shared with their partners and identified these as a major benefit of companionship. Eight out of ten participants described going on trips with their partners. The majority also described other shared activities and interests. One woman stated that:

We do a lot of things together because we enjoy a lot of the same things, have the same interests, for example to kind of TV we watch and the kinds of things we do at this place.

Another participant described the interests she and her partner had in common:

So we discovered that we loved the theater together, so we'd go to the theater together. And we both love dogs. So we found out we had more in common than we thought.

Shared activities and interests were a positive experience for all participants and nearly all identified them as a major benefit of companionship.

### *Intimacy*

Participants were asked about intimacy gained and identified this as another benefit of repartnership. In response to the question of what she had gained from her relationship, one woman reported:

Just companionship and closeness and sharing with someone in an intimate way. I like to lie in bed in the morning and talk about whatever comes up first thing in the morning. You can't do that when you're not retired. I cherish that, to have somebody, a lot of my friends are widowed and they don't have that.

Another participant described her appreciation of the intimacy she had found in repartnership:

The physical and sexual intimacy, that is good! It's that and being important to somebody, to one person. It is very important and having someone to get to know at a deeper and deeper level. So there's that wonderful exploration and uncovering and interdependency.

Participants overwhelmingly expressed an appreciation for the routines, interests and activities they shared with their partners as well as the intimacy they had in their relationship. For all participants these benefits made the compromises they chose to make worth it. One participant articulated expressed this acceptance of the challenges and sacrifices of repartnership for the benefits of companionship:

So you just have to balance that kind of thing [*the challenges of a blended family and compromises made because of that*] against the companionship and the love that we do share.

### Perceived Independence in Repartnership vs. Previous Marriage

All participants evaluated the perceived independence in their repartnerships as equally strong or stronger than in their previous marriages. Eight out of ten participants reported that their perceived independence was stronger in their repartnership than in

their previous marriages. This was attributed to multiple life stage factors. Life stage factors included increased maturity, decreased responsibilities in later life related to having adult children, being retired, the impact of time spent alone during widowhood, and things learned during this time. Increased independence associated with repartnership was also attributed to the social and cultural evolution caused by the women's and other social movements of the 1960's.

### *The Impact of Life Stage Changes*

#### *Maturity*

The theme of maturity and its impact on perceived independence arose in several interviews. In these interviews the respondents identified their sense of personal development over time and the way this growth increased their perceived independence. One woman described the shift in her approach toward her relationship and her increased ability to differentiate herself from her partner:

Well my expectations are different too. Things just don't seem to bother me so much as they would have 50 years ago. He likes to watch a lot of- well I say he watches anything with balls on TV, but you know I don't care. You know 50 years ago I would have gotten bent out of shape, "how come he doesn't want to watch the same things I want to watch". I guess it's more of an acceptance kind of thing. I realize that he's the person he is now. He was just 77, he's older. But you know, I'm not going to be able to change him. And I don't go into this expecting that I'm going to change him so if he wants to watch all those things on TV, I'll do my knitting or my cross word puzzle or read a book, and it's fine.

The three women who discussed the impact of maturity on independence felt that the maturation process had increased their overall sense of independence and that they had taken this with them into their repartnerships.

### *Decreased Responsibilities in Later Life*

Over half of participants identified decreased responsibilities associated with later life as a reason that they felt a stronger sense of independence in their repartnership than in their previous marriage. These included having grown children and being retired. One respondent explained:

There aren't many decisions when you have your children grown. There aren't many, you can just enjoy each other and doing things.

Another woman expressed similar enjoyment of this increased sense of freedom:

All the restraints of being a family, raising a family were gone. C and I used to say, we're so lucky, we don't have to worry about making a living, we don't have to worry about raising our children, we're free. All we had to worry about was ourselves,... I had that feeling during that period of life all those forces of earning a living, making a home, raising your children, getting them educated, getting them on the straight path as much as you could, all that was over and I could now think about me for a while. And I did, I really enjoyed that.

A third repeated this sentiment:

And of course it was a different stage in our lives. Cause when you have the children and you're raising a family you have lots of things to do. Now your family raised and gone and out on their own so its more relaxing at our age. We just enjoyed each other thoroughly.

Finally, a fourth participant articulated the decrease in independence she experienced while raising children:

When you have young children you're not as independent as you were when you didn't have children.

The above responses illuminate the impact that having grown children and being in retirement can have on perceived independence. The majority of women interviewed felt that these decreased responsibilities of later life increased their sense of independence and their experience of leisure. This is yet another factor that strengthened women's sense of perceived independence in repartnership as compared with their previous marriages.

### *Impact of Being Alone after Being Widowed*

Similar to the theme of maturing, the impact on independence of the time spent alone during widowhood and the lessons learned during this time arose as a theme. Eight out of ten women discussed what they had learned during their time alone and the increased sense of independence that resulted from this. The majority believed that the time they spent alone had enhanced their sense of independence and that this experience was a reason that they felt more independent in their repartnerships than in their previous marriages. One participant discussed her increased independence during widowhood stating:

... you have to become sort of independent because you are. You've got to pay the bills, handle the repairs, and do all these things. But as time went on it came easier and it was just routine.

Another woman described the positive experience of learning during widowhood and the increased sense of competence she derived from it:

I think that for me these years since after my husband died was a learning [experience]. I had worked hard to develop my own life in these past years and it had been interesting to me to see what I could [do], how I would evolve, how I could manage, and I think it was a source of satisfaction, compensatory satisfaction that I was able to survive at all. I told many people that it was an incredibly high learning curve to manage to handle all the things that he had handled and continue handling the things that I had handled. So, I achieved it and it was hard work and hard going...but I also found that there were some benefits or advantages that were very interesting and pleasurable.

### *Desire to hold on to positive widowhood experiences*

Several respondents discussed their desire to retain lessons they had learned during widowhood and to retain the increased independence they had experienced during their time alone when entering into their new relationships. One participant stated:



Well it's been a sort of determination to hold onto the good things that I experienced when I was alone but also to remember and to enjoy the partnership and the sociability, the physicality, the respect and consideration for someone else.

Another described a similar wish to hold onto that which she had come to enjoy in her time alone:

It took me a long time to get used to like living alone and I don't want to give it up.

The new experiences of independence in widowhood were evaluated positively by over half the participants and many expressed a desire to hold onto these things in their repartnership. It is possible that these new experiences during the time spent alone and the wish to carry them into repartnership are one reason that the participants evaluated their perceived independence as stronger in repartnership than in their previous marriages.

### *Physical Changes of Aging*

One aspect of the later life stage is physical aging. Participants discussed the impact that physical changes associated with aging had on their perceived independence in repartnership. Overall, the physical aspects of aging appeared to have less of an impact on perceived independence than did other developmental and psychological life stage factors. While the two oldest participants, ages 87 and 93 noted that the physical changes of aging decreased the strength of their feelings of independence they did not identify that this changed their feelings of independence *within* their relationship. Only two participants, one who identified having a physical disease and the other who had fallen

and broken her wrist, reported that their physical changes had made them more dependent on their partners. One of these women stated that:

We just maybe, in the past year or so, found that we were slowing down: It probably does [impact my feeling of independence]. Well for one thing I have this blood disease... and so I think I have become more dependent on him because of that.

Less than half of participants reported that aging and the associated physical changes decreased the strength of their sense of independence and only two related this to their independence in repartnership. While physical changes appeared to be related to overall feelings of independence, in this study they had less of an impact on perceived independence than did other developmental and psychological life stage factors.

### *Sociocultural Evolution*

The final theme found to influence the sense of independence many women felt in repartnerships when compared to their previous marriages, was the influence of the women's movement. Though only three participants specifically mentioned this, it is a significant finding as it points to the influence of sociocultural and generational factors on perceived independence. One woman explained her understanding of the differences in her perceived independence in her marriage and her repartnership. She stated:

I think I was not anywhere near as independent or autonomous when I was married. I never ever would have thought about going out on a trip without my husband. Some of it is I think maturing and figuring out that when I was young when I was married - well I don't know the difference. Maybe it was a way of looking at the world in '53 or '54 or '55' is different than the way people see the world now. I guess the educated mother role was what I was taught to be important.

Another participant discussed the sense of independence she gained as a result of the social changes taking place during the 1960's:

I see it as a real sort of triumph of the times because in 1960 when I got married I thought being married and having children would be totally fulfilling and now I realize that I had to evolve out of that into a very good job where I was making a real contribution and that I wanted that and it was really important to me.

These participants noted that this time period, and their exposure to it, strengthened their sense of independence. It is important to note that due to the age range of the respondents and to other factors, participants likely had differing levels of contact with these movements. That said, for those who volunteered information about the impact of the social changes of the 1960's it was clear that these movements strengthened their perceived independence and factored into the increased independence they found in their repartnerships.

When asked to compare their perceived independence in repartnership to the sense of independence they had had in their previous marriages, the majority of respondents identified a stronger perceived independence in their repartnership than in their previous marriages. This was attributed to increased maturity, lessons learned in their time alone, decreased family responsibilities, and to the impact social movements of the 1960's had on their sense of independence.

### Summary

The major findings of this qualitative exploratory study were 1) the majority of participants had a strong sense of perceived independence in repartnership; 2) perceived independence was a subjective experience that was defined in a variety of ways; 3) the majority of women chose to compromise aspects of their autonomous decision making for the benefits of companionship and maintained a strong sense of perceived

independence while making such compromises; 4) a minority created stricter boundaries in their relationships to preserve the perceived independence they had gained during their widowhood; and 5) all participants felt that their independence in repartnership was as strong or stronger than in their previous marriage due to life stage and sociocultural changes.

These findings provide rich data about the nature of perceived independence in repartnership, the ways women negotiate this independence, and the ways perceived independence changes over time. Some of these findings were supported by the literature and others were not. The most salient and unexpected aspects of these findings are discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact that post-widowhood repartnership had on older women's perceived sense of independence. During ten interviews, narrative data were gathered about women's sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, competence, and self-reliance in their repartnership and changes in their sense of independence across their lifespan. Key findings of this research are as follows. 1) Perceived independence was subjectively defined and was shaped by participants' individual needs for attachment and autonomy in repartnership. 2) The majority of participants chose to compromise aspects of their independence in exchange for the benefits of companionship. They felt comfortable with this choice and maintained a strong sense of perceived independence in the face of such compromise by preserving their autonomy, self-efficacy and self-reliance in myriad ways. 3) A minority of participants was uninterested in compromising their autonomy to the extent they had in their previous marriages. These respondents chose to establish stronger boundaries than the women in the 'compromise' category in order to protect the strong perceived independence they had gained in their time alone. 4) Perceived independence in repartnership was evaluated as equally strong or stronger than independence in previous marriage. This was attributed to various life stage changes and sociocultural shifts. This

chapter further interprets the findings and relates key findings to prior studies and theoretical frameworks presented in the literature review.

### Subjective Nature of Perceived Independence

The findings of this study illuminated the subjective nature of older women's perceived independence in repartnership. This was a surprising finding. I expected to find that the greater the impact repartnership had on autonomous decision-making (decisions about what to do with one's time, when to do it, and with whom to spend time for example) the less independent women would feel. I also anticipated that women who created more boundaries to limit the impact that repartnership had on autonomous decision making would report higher levels of perceived independence. This was not case. The majority of participants felt a strong sense of independence in spite of making compromises for the benefits of companionship: companionship impacted their level of autonomy in decision making but this appeared to be less important for the women. For these women perceived independence was not determined by the absence of compromises but by the ability to maintain an overall perception of autonomy, self-efficacy and self-reliance while choosing to make compromises in relationship. It was the minority of participants who felt independent only when the compromises to their autonomous decision-making were limited by self-established boundaries in the relationship. These findings suggest that independence is a subjective state that cannot be universally defined. While compromising autonomous decision making for the needs of a partner decreased the strength of several participants' perceived independence, it did not alter many other participants feelings of overall independence.

This finding was not what I expected to find: my initial hypothesis was that increased compromise would limit perceived independence. In addition, this finding challenges much of the literature on independence that was reviewed. There is a body of theoretical literature on independence and the human need for autonomy that views independence as a subjective concept. Both Deci & Ryan (1985, 2002) and Sheldon et al (2005) acknowledge that an action or behavior that allows one person to feel autonomous could cause another to feel quite controlled (Sheldon et. al, 2005). They consider independence to be a subjectively defined concept and a personal feeling that is achieved in a wide variety of circumstances. The majority of literature on psychological development and women's independence in relationships, however, holds a more universal notion of objective independence.

Mahler (1972) and Winnicott's (1958) theoretical literature on the developmental processes through which people develop a capacity to see themselves as separate from their caregivers and become independent does not acknowledge the full subjectivity of independence. While these theories identify the need for both attachment and autonomy in healthy development they do not present an image of adult independence as subjective. Cultural critiques of Mahler's theory of separation individuation have identified this narrow perspective on normative individuation (Berzoff, Melano, Flanagan & Hertz, 2002). They have called attention to the White, Western, individualist bias in this theory and highlighted ways in which the objective notion of healthy individuation described by Mahler do not apply to all cultures. While acknowledging the dual needs for independence and attachment in healthy development, these theories do not support a view of independence as subjectively defined and experienced.

Literature reviewed on widowhood, repartnership and "living apart together" relationships shares this concept of objective independence. Literature on widowhood highlights independence that is gained during widowhood (Davidson 2001; Karlsson & Borell 2002; de Jong Gierveld, 2002; Carr 2004; Moorman, Booth & Fingerman, 2006). This research finds that independence exists in the absence of a partner. Literature on repartnership speaks mostly of independence as a disincentive to repartnership (Davidson, 2001; Davidson, 2002; Talbott 1998 & Gentry and Shulman, 1988). The repartnership literature that does discuss independence in repartnership looks at the boundaries that are established in order to preserve it (Karlsson & Borell, 2002; de Jong Gierveld, 2002 & 2004). While there is no question that the independence discussed in this literature is one form of independence, the literature does not identify the multiplicity and subjectivity of the concept. They all espouse a model of independence in which one feels independent through the decrease in compromises of autonomy. There is no discussion of feelings of independence existing in the presence of relationship compromise.

Wendy Hollway (2004) criticizes the dichotomy between autonomy and compromise that exists in feminist literature. According to Hollway this dichotomy neglects the possibility that a woman can feel independent, autonomous, self-efficacious, competent, and self reliant while also being in an interdependent heterosexual relationship where she provides and receives care, and sacrifices aspects of autonomous decision making in exchange for mutual compromise. Hollway believes that "being one's own person, knowing one's pleasures and powers, is not in contradiction with considering someone else and caring for them" (Hollway, 2004, p. 321).



Holloway's notion that autonomy and interdependent attachment are not mutually exclusive supports the finding of this study. What was made overwhelmingly clear from the data gathered is that there was not one universal set of criteria that allowed women to feel independent. The amount that women were able to compromise their autonomous decision-making and maintain strong perceived independence existed on a spectrum. While the minority of participants felt the need to impose strong boundaries to limit the compromises they made the majority of women interviewed felt that they were able to assert their own power and needs, engage in their own pursuits and pleasures, and be their own people while simultaneously caring for, considering, and being responsible to a partner.

Human beings have competing needs for autonomy and attachment (Mahler, 1972; Winnicott, 1958). The balance that is struck between these competing needs is, however, heavily shaped by socio-cultural and psychological factors (Berzoff, Melano, Flanagan & Hertz, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002; Sheldon et. al, 2005). Each individual negotiates this delicate balance in slightly different ways due to their cultural background, the ideals of autonomy and attachment espoused in it and their personal psychological and social histories. The women in this study did just this. With nearly unanimous consistency each woman found a way to maintain a strong sense of subjective independence in repartnership.

#### Perceived Repartnership Independence is Generally Stronger than Previous Marriage

The majority of women in this study felt that their perceived independence in repartnership was stronger than in their previous marriage. This was due to

developmental life stage changes such as the increased maturity gained in later life, the experience of widowhood and the things learned from it, and the decreased responsibilities that came with retirement and having grown children. It was also attributed to social and cultural changes that resulted from the women's movement and the increased awareness of women's independence that grew out of these movements.

As previously mentioned, much of the literature discussing widowhood and repartnership identifies some of these life stage factors. It does not, however, directly relate these developmental changes to increased strength in perceived independence in repartnership. Lopata (1996) and others identify the increased independence that often comes with widowhood, but they do not link this to repartnership independence. In fact they do quite the opposite. They look at the ways in which the independence gained during widowhood and the potential for dependence that arises when one is required to care take an ill partner, often prevent women from wanting to repartner. Thus they do not consider how the increased independence that can come from this later life stage can be brought into repartnership and can serve to strengthen perceived independence in it.

Newer literature on “unconventional” partnerships where partners “live apart together” does look at the impact that widowhood and the time spent has on repartnership independence. They found that, having been widowed and spent time alone, many women create boundaries in their relationships to protect the autonomy, personal space and time that they gained when alone. These studies support the finding that the experience of being widowed in later life and of making the often difficult and transformative life stage transition to being single can strengthen perceived independence in repartnership.

Often when later life changes are referenced there is a heavy focus on the increasing dependence that comes with aging. Attention is typically paid to the increasing physical impairments that come with aging and the resulting dependencies. While the impact of physical changes on older adults perceived independence were partially supported by the findings of this study, they appeared much less significant than the developmental and psychological effects of aging. This finding is supported by Sheldon et al.'s (2005) work, which identifies developmental increases in autonomy that come with aging. In addition Arber and Evandrou (1993) discuss the multidimensionality of independence and state that increased dependence in one dimension of independence, (such as physical independence), does not cause a decrease of independence in the dimensions of autonomy or reciprocity.

While several women in this study discussed the ways in which physical changes weakened aspects of their independence, they felt psychological and developmental life stage changes had much more impact on perceived independence in their repartnerships. The minimal impact of physical changes on perceived independence was surprising, given the cultural belief that aging is marked by physical decline and a resulting decrease in independence (Arber & Evandrou, 1993). This finding may be a result of the small sample or the fact that the majority are in good health, of middle class status and in the “third age” category described by Leslett (1989). However it may also point to the fact that the supportive effects of developmental and psychological aging on the dimensions of autonomy and reciprocity bolster perceived repartnership independence despite age related physical change.

For these older women, it seems that the act of maturing, weathering experiences of widowhood, learning to be alone and decreased responsibilities helped them to feel more independent in their repartnerships than they did in their previous marriages. This finding is significant in that it challenges our notions of decreased independence in aging and our notion of independence existing only in the absence of dependence or interdependence.

### Implications for Practice and Further Research

#### *Research implications*

This exploratory study investigated the little researched topic of women's perceived independence in late life post-widowhood repartnership. The findings exposed the subjective nature of older women's perceived sense of independence and the overall strength of their perceived independence in repartnership, especially when compared with their previous marriages. While it pointed to several factors shaping their subjective definitions of independence further research is needed to more fully understand this phenomenon. Research will need to look specifically at the multiple social, cultural, historical, and psychological factors influencing subjective definitions of independence. This will require doing research with a broader and more diverse sample.

#### *Practice implications*

This study has several practice implications. First, it challenges our notions that independence is an objective concept and that it exists in polar opposition to interdependence. The findings show that perceived independence is a subjective concept and that one can feel independence while being in an interdependent mutually

compromising relationship. This revised conception of independence can assist clinicians and others working with older women to foster a client's independence without imposing culturally defined notions of objective independence. It can help these professionals more fully understand the complexity and subjectivity of the experience of independence. This study can assist clinicians to understand the importance of companionship in the lives of many older women and the compromises they are willing to make for these benefits. Finally, this study challenges prevalent notions of older adults as physically dependent and will help clinicians challenge these biases and take a strengths based approach when working with their older clients.

### Strengths and Limitations

This study has several limitations. The small, self-selected, racially and socioeconomically homogeneous sample limits the generalizability of the study. Generalizability was, however, already limited by the qualitative nature of the study design. This design was chosen as it allowed for the collection of rich personal data from participants. While the homogeneity of the sample limits generalizability it may also make the findings more valid as they apply to the demographic of older, White, middle class, educated women. The potential for researcher bias in data collection and analysis, and for unintended observer effects are a limitation to the validity of the study. While I attempted to control for my own bias I entered into the collection and analysis of my data with personal views regarding relationships, aging, and independence. While my findings disproved some of these it is likely that my own personal beliefs impacted the data collected and the analysis.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study looked at the impact that post-widowhood repartnering had on older women's sense of independence. Findings showed that women had a strong sense of independence in their repartnerings and that the level was generally higher than in previous marriages. While women had a strong sense of independence in repartnering their concepts of independence were subjective. They negotiated this independence in a variety of ways. Some chose to make compromises that impacted aspects of their autonomous decision-making in exchange for interdependent companionship. While making such compromises these women maintained a strong sense of perceived independence by preserving other important aspects of their autonomy, self-efficacy and self-reliance. Other women, a minority of the sample, chose to establish boundaries that protected the level of independence they had gained during their widowhood. These two groups of women had different concepts of what it meant to be independent, yet each participant managed to preserve her own subjective sense of independence. These findings challenge cultural notions of a universally defined concept of independence where autonomy is lost if the individual is in a mutual/interdependent relationship. The study findings support a model of late life relationships in which women can maintain feelings of independence while choosing to enter into interdependent, mutually accommodating relationships. Finally, this study paints a picture of later life marked by increased, rather than decreased, independence and highlights the strength, growth and increased autonomy that is possible for women in their later years.

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## Appendix A

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter

March 7, 2009

Jessica Eipper

Dear Jessica,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and all is now in order. We are happy to give final approval to your study.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. It is nice to see a thesis on older people. It is very unusual and will be most interesting to hear what they have to say. I'll bet they will enjoy talking to you.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Mollie Sherry, Research Advisor

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent

Dear Participant,

Hello. My name is Jess Eipper and I am a Masters' level social work student at Smith College School for Social Work and I am doing a research study on widowed women's experiences entering into new relationships in later life. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the ways in which women's sense of independence changes when they re-partner after losing a spouse. I hope that this research will help people to understand the experiences of older women and the ways in which re-partnership impacts their lives. This information will be important for researchers, clinicians, and geriatricians, because it will expand their understanding of the role that new relationships play in the lives of older women and will shed light on widowed women's needs for independence and companionship in later life and how these needs are negotiated and met. This research is part of a Masters' thesis project and may be used for presentation and publication.

If you decide to be in this study you will be asked to participate in a single 45 minute interview. During the interview you will be asked about the ways in which your new relationship has impacted your sense of independence. The interviews will take place in locations that offer enough privacy to protect your confidentiality. They will be audiotaped and transcribed by me.

To be eligible for the study you must be a woman who has been widowed and later re-partnered.

It is possible that you may experience some emotional discomfort or distress when reflecting on your experience of re-partnership after the loss of a spouse. You should know that though you will be asked when your spouse passed away, you will not be asked to further discuss this loss. You are also encouraged to share only as much as you feel comfortable and may withdraw from the interview at any point during the process. In consideration of these risks, you will be provided with a list of mental health referral sources should you seek professional support.

I hope that you will enjoy discussing your re-partnership and the ways in which your independence has been impacted by your relationship. I also hope that you will gain some insight into your personal needs for independence and connectedness by participating in the interview process. You may also benefit from the opportunity to contribute to the scholarly and clinical knowledge on the experiences of older women and the little studied topic of late life post-widowhood re-partnership. There is no financial compensation for participating in this study.

If you participate in the study your confidentiality will be protected in the following ways: 1) Interviews will occur in private settings. 2) Interviews will be audiotaped, listened to and transcribed only by me. 3) All identifiable information gathered in interviews including names and any identifying details, will be removed during the transcription process and the research findings will be presented without any identifying information. 4) My project advisor will have access to the interview data only after the identifiable information has been removed. 5) All data and audio recordings will be held in a secure location for three years as required by the Federal regulations governing such research. After three years, if the data is no longer needed, it will be destroyed according to Federal guidelines. If the data is needed after 3 years it will continue to be stored in a secure location until it is no longer needed, at which point it will be destroyed. Electronic data will also be protected and stored securely.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any point up to the date of March 15<sup>th</sup> 2009. Should you withdraw from the study, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed to protect your confidentiality. In the event that you withdraw, I ask that you contact me at the phone or e-mail listed below to inform me. You are also free not to answer any questions you do not wish to during the interview process in order to protect your privacy and comfort. You may contact me at the email or phone listed below with questions or concerns about this study before and after the interview. If you have any more questions about your rights within this research process or any questions pertaining to the study please to contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study! Please keep a copy of the informed consent material for your records.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Contact:**  
Jess Eipper

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Somerville MA 02144  
[jeipper@email.smith.edu](mailto:jeipper@email.smith.edu)  
(413) 522 – 6340

## Appendix C

### Interview Guide

Code # :

#### Demographic Information

Could you please tell me your age, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, work history, education level, current living situation?

Do you have children?

#### Relationship History

How old were you when you were first married?

How many times were you married?

What was/were the duration/s of your marriage/s?

How long after you were widowed did your new relationship begin?

How did this relationship begin and how long has it lasted?

What is the nature of this relationship (i.e. are you married, dating, co-habiting, companions)?

#### Relationship Dynamics

Can you talk briefly about how you and your partner spend your time and those things that you do together and apart?

Can you tell me about your physical space and the way you negotiate having shared vs. separate space?

Can you describe how you and your partner manage finances and household tasks? Are they shared or separate?

Do you or would you provide physical care for your partner should the need arise?



Can you talk about compromises or accommodations you make in your relationship, how you negotiate these compromises and how you feel about making them?

Could you discuss the process of making decisions in your relationship and how you negotiate these decisions?

### Independence

Can you please talk about your sense of independence in your current relationship?

Can you please talk about your sense of independence in your previous marriage and the ways in which your current relationship is similar or different from your past marriage in regard to your level of independence?

Can you please talk about your independence during the time you spent alone?

How have your feelings of independence changed since you began this relationship?

Could you please describe your overall feelings of independence across your lifetime?

### Additional Thoughts

Briefly, what do you feel are the most significant things you gain from this relationship and the biggest challenges you face in it?

Do you have any additional thoughts that you would like to add at this time?

Do you have any questions for me?